

# Trade Unions and the Liberation Movement



# Purpose

- The main purpose of this presentation is to:
  1. Remind the ANC that the Alliance is important and not an irritation – you can't be a complete and grounded ANC leader if you are not aware of this;
  2. Secondly it is to discredit the workerist project that seeks to break away from the Alliance largely led by NUMSA;
  3. Thirdly, the intersection of political led by an ANC struggle of Labour Movement guided by the Vanguard Party.



## Trade Unions and the Liberation Movement in South Africa

- In his speech to the 8<sup>th</sup> Congress of COSATU, in 2003, then-Deputy President Jacob Zuma put it like this:

*“The alliance should work on creating more conducive conditions for workers and all of its citizens. The ANC, to which the majority of us here are members, has an objective in the alliance to fight and protect the freedom all of us attained. The SACP is equally important to the alliance as other members. They have their own destination. When the ANC arrived at its destination, which was to democratise the country for the betterment of all its citizens, the SACP said it will stop its journey once socialism has been achieved. This does not mean, as our detractors say, the alliance is in conflict with itself. This only signifies the variety of ideologies which form up the tripartite alliance. Socialism is the final destination of both COSATU and the SACP. I urge you to back the ANC in next year’s general election if you want your cause furthered. The ANC must win and the final destination, socialism, will be closer.”*



# Understanding the role of the trade union movement in the present period

## 1. The basic character and role of a Trade Union



- organized mass contingent
- focus on basic economic struggle like wages and conditions of work
- open to all, irrespective of; race, gender, geography, income and job
- unites irrespective of the level of political or ideological orientation
- provide fertile ground for class and political consciousness
- trade unions are not apolitical, they take part in the political struggle,
- independence should not mean; 'surrendering the leadership of the national struggle to the upper and middle strata'. Joe Slovo said.
- participation in the national liberation alliance will ensure hegemonic and strengthen the role of the working class

## Trade union struggle and political leadership of the working class

- trade union struggle cannot be separated from the struggle for national democratic revolution and for socialism.
- a trade union and the federation, should not attempt to be revolutionary political vanguard to itself
- a workerist tendency has re-surfaced and unions or union leadership tends to turn itself into a vanguard political party.
- in the 1980s, this tendency acquired some prominence within the trade union movement, first in FOSATU then in earlier COSATU days
- It seeks to misappropriate our struggle languages, our communist heritage and slogans in order to position a 'workerist political party'



# The Party of the working class and COSATU

- COSATU has recognised political leadership role of the vanguard of the working class - the South African Communist Party
- That's where the workers seek political guidance and the 'line of march' with regard to the general political tasks of the working class
- COSATU is what it is now due to the contribution of the communists
- many communists in COSATU are; shop stewards, regional, provincial, national leaders or are officials thus lead the workers by example.
- Communists strive for maximum unity of the workers and advance workers' demands and respects internal discipline and processes
- Engages in building class consciousness, through joint political programmes between the SACP and COSATU and its affiliates,
- This strengthens the militant and campaigning working class movement



# The economic and political struggle

- trade unions cannot develop outside of the political movement,
- the struggle of the workers at the workplace cannot be divorced from the struggle at the community level.
- In the 1980s leaders in FOSATU and Trotskyites (anarchists) unsuccessfully argued that trade unions should remain neutral
- this sought to politically and ideologically separate the trade union movement from the broader national liberation movement led by ANC
- this call was not about 'political neutrality', but an attempt to build an independent workerist political base away from our ANC-led one.
- we need to emphasise that this workerist party project, remained a minority project and has never at any point enjoyed popular influence



- Being independent and being part of the Alliance
- "The struggle of the working class does not end at the factory floor; workers come up against the problems of high transport costs, rents and inadequate community facilities, all of which eat into their wages.
- trade union 'independence' is related to an attempt to divide the politics and the economics.
- independence is one that builds a militant COSATU that takes up day-to-day struggles of the workers but this independent COSATU cannot be opposed to the Alliance





- Therefore there is no contradiction of being independent and being part of the Alliance as uWalter Sisulu wrote in the August 1955 issue of SACTU`s, Workers Unity:
- “The victory can only be won and imperialism uprooted by forging strong ties *of alliance between the liberation movements and the trade union movements, by correcting any misconceptions that the trade unions had nothing to do with politics. Similarly, political leaders must know that the struggle of the people depends on the workers, and therefore it must be their duty to organize workers into trade union movement*”



# The ANC & COSATU



- We need to understand the basic character of the ANC as a multi-class organization - presenting no single ideology or class.
- The ANC recognizes the role of the working class and that it is not the political vanguard of the working class, but a multi-class organisation with working class bias
- trade union movement has encouraged workers to swell its ranks hence the leading cadre in the trade union movement should also be an active member of the ANC
- Otherwise we will be surrendering class leadership of the national democratic revolution to the bourgeoisie as the former president of the ANC Chief Albert Luthuli said when he described the relationship between SACTU, and the ANC and the role of SACTU in the liberation struggle when he said that:
- ***"SACTU is the spear, ANC the shield..." as well as that "No worker is a good member of Congress unless he is also a Trade Unionist. No Trade Unionist is a good Trade Unionist unless he is also a member of Congress...."***

# Moses Mabhida Personified the importance of the Alliance by Oliver Tambo

## Background

- Moses Mabhida could do all this because he was of the people,
- a product of university of mass struggle and the life experience of the exploited and downtrodden workers and peasants of our country.
- that education inspired Moses Mabhida to join the ANC, the South African Communist Party and the trade union movement, South African Congress of Trade Unions.
- rose from the lowest levels to become a national leader,
- a member of Umkhonto we Sizwe, Secretary to the Revolutionary Council, and later Chairperson of the Politico-Military Council.
- an international representative and an underground organiser.
- rose through the ranks of the Communist Party, became General Secretary, while for many years he was Vice President of the South African Congress of Trade Unions.



- it puzzled our friends who wondered why Comrade Mabhida had to serve in so many senior positions in different organisations.
- But, above all, it enraged our enemies.
- this reflected the acceptability among our people, the idea and practice of the unity of the revolutionary democrat, the socialist and the trade union movements in the South African struggle for national liberation.
- understood the importance of the unity the movements, succeeded in serving each one and all of them individually and together,
- was virtually a collective front for national and social emancipation.



- international reaction tried desperately hard and consistently to separate the three movements from and against one another.
- There were efforts to separate the trade unions from the broad democratic movement,
- To persuade unions to be nothing more than an agency, a vehicle to bring material benefits to a working class which remains enslaved.
- those who toil should not only enjoy the fruit of their sweat, but should do so as free men and women. Accordingly,





- fought against attempts to turn the trade unions into appendages of the property-owning classes
- resisted all efforts to emasculate the working class as a leading social force for political change in our country.
- was fiercely opposed to all manoeuvres which sought to educate the working class to repudiate its own history
- despised being turned into a base for the creation of a new political formation separate from and opposed to the ANC and the Party.
- He could take no other position because he had learnt and absorbed the lesson passed on to him and to us by the late Chief Albert Luthuli: that the ANC and SACTU were to each other a spear and a shield.

- knows that the durability of the alliance between the ANC, the Communist Party and the trade union movement lay in strengthening each as an independent formation and in securing their cooperation on an entirely voluntary basis.
- He therefore always worked to ensure that these formations respected one another and developed among them a deep-seated feeling of revolutionary unity and interdependence.



- Find traces of the trade unions in each step by the liberation movement
- When the African People's Organization was formed in 1902 there was this intersection and interaction between the liberation struggle and the workers struggle
- APO, a predominantly Coloured organization said this to the British government approval of the Act of Union of South Africa:
- "How are we to set about, In our opinion , there is but one way and that is the economic method. Undoubtedly, the Coloured and Native races of South Africa hold the strongest weapon ever placed in the hands of any class. The very stability, the prosperity, even the continuance for but a few days of the economic existence of South Africa depends on the Labour market and we are the labour market, this will bring the selfish white politicians to their knees".





# Effect of the APO Statement

- saw the combination of economic struggle by the workers and the the political struggle by the liberation movement.
- the South African Native National Congress (SANNC) experienced an increase in the number of African workers from 15 000 in 1890 to 19 000.
- whites had a monopoly of the best paid jobs, of entry into skilled trades and were given positions of authority over blacks.
- White workers represented a share in the super profits made by the white capitalists out of the gross exploitation of Blacks and Africans in particular.



- the intersection between the class and racial character of the South African contradictions resulted in the natural and mutual relationship between the ANC and the labour movement.
- ***It was understood that the oppression of black people as race was a precondition for their exploitation as a class.***
- Hence the progressive labour movement has always seen the ANC as a political home in which together with all the other oppressed shared the trenches in the fight against Colonialism of a Special Type and apartheid



# First-hand experience of the mercilessness of colonialism and apartheid

## in the farms, in the mines and in factories.

- workers have travelled side by side with the people's movement in the development of our liberation struggle.
- no political milestone was reached by our movement without a quantitative and qualitative contribution by the progressive labour movement.
- Millions of COSATU members remain committed members and activists who like our forbearers in SACTU naturally join the ranks of the ANC mobilizing the people behind the Freedom Charter.
- the ANC was formed so that the plight of black and African workers in particular would constitute its integral focal thrust.
- Note that a protest petition against the 1913 Land Act to the Prime Minister, dated 14 February 1914 (hardly two years after the ANC was formed), from the Reverend John Dube, the first President of the South African Native National Congress on among others expressed the following *concerns*:



- *“We do not see how it is possible for this law to effect any greater separation between the races than obtains now. It is evident that the aim of this law is to compel service by taking away the means of independence and self-improvement. This compulsory service at reduced wages and high rents will not be separation, but an intermingling of the most injurious character of both races... even supposing a little protection were there, the wrongs which might be suffered in that line are as one to a hundred in comparison with what we must now endure from the rapacious farmer who seizes the opportunity to raise our rent and reduce our wages”*



## The expressed the relationship between the national content and the class content of the National Liberation Struggle.

- political outlook of the ANC has created a natural affinity and an organic relationship between itself and the workers hence we continue to fight for and to defend
- Our relationship with the ANC is so integral and organic that the victories of the ANC are our victories too; the ANC's heroes are our heroes too, attacks against the ANC have always meant an attack on us too!
- when the ANC was banned in 1960, after the Sharpeville Massacre many of SACTU leaders, members of the ANC, were also banned, imprisoned and some were killed.
- Effectively, it became operationally impossible for SACTU to operate and this had an effect of crippling SACTU as an organisation.



- The Apartheid regime understood that if they were to hit hard on the ANC, they had to cripple the workers organisations.
- Workers' organisation has always been a kernel around which the liberation movement built its life.
- In 1961 when the Congress Movement called a strike against government which had proclaimed a republic, the success of that strike was reliant on SACTU mobilizing its members for a stay away.
- Bunting noted as follows later; "wherever workers were organised into trade unions there was a favourable response to the strike call."



## Extension of Our organic relationship with the ANC

- It also extends to MK activities as amongst the members of the Luthuli Detachment some of whom participated in the Wankie Spolilo Operation which was the first MK group to have physical combat with the enemy were trade unionist such as comrade Eric Mtshali , Justice "Gizenga" Mpanza, Archie Sibeko, Mark Shope etc.
- These were amongst the first to receive military training in the Soviet Union. (The Wankie and Spolilo Campaigns - Rendani Moses Ralinala, Jabulani Sithole, Gregory Houston and Bernard Magubane).
- Also during the intensification of the struggle in the 80's when MK activities became integral to the trade union activities leading to many MK operations directly linked to strengthening workers struggle at the point of production.
- in the TRC, MK units confirmed, amongst others that the unit called "Operation Butterfly", that planted the limpet mines which exploded on 27th September 1985 as well as at OK Bazaars and at Game in Durban West Street, was directed at the dispute between unions and management which was refusing to accede to workers demands.
- (Truth and Reconciliation Commission – application by comrade Qonda Msomi and Sihle Mbongwa.)



## This political coherency and dynamism between the ANC and the trade union movement



- was also seen when CWIU led successful stay ways in the then PWV region in 1984 which disrupted SASOL that was completing a process of privatization.
- Sasol, a symbol of South African independence, was South Africa's answer to the oil embargo and through these struggles the apartheid project was disrupted.
- workers have always stood ready to be the first in the line of fire hence among the first members of the ANC to be executed by the Apartheid Regime in March 1964 were trade unionists, comrade Vuyisile Mini, who served as a secretary of the Metal Workers Union.
- a substantial number of the ANC leaders, Treason Trialists, were trade unionists like comrade Lawrence Nkosi, Billy Nair, Lesley Masina, Harry Gwala, Curnick Ndlovu
- In the Rivonia Treason Trial, most of those arrested as part of the MK high command were trade unionists included comrade Raymond
  - Mhlaba, Elias Motsoaledi and



## The extent to which our history and that of the ANC are intertwined

- the late ANC president comrade Oliver Tambo would say that when we speak of each other ***“we speak of and to our own”***. Each one of us is a mirror which reflects each other’s strengths and weaknesses.
- The ANC is conscious of the role of the workers and the working class in the Liberation Struggle and have maintained a perspective which has guided this movement over the years.
- a strong relationship between SACTU, later COSATU, and the ANC meant that the liberation movement had a historically proven resilient force within its ranks.



- It meant that there was a force which by virtue of its location in the country's production process and because of its own first hand experiences with exploitation
- the force had every reason to fight the white establishment which was a symbol of racial oppression and class exploitation.
- meaning that our relationship with the ANC has always been predicated on an understanding that a programme to win national liberation and democracy required placing workers at the centre of such a struggle as the most reliable force.



- whilst the ANC is characterised as a broad church which harbours different class forces but its core interests and constituency is the working class.
- In the Strategy and Tactics adopted in the 52nd National Congress this working class orientation is described thus “The vision that the ANC pursues is informed by the morality of caring and human solidarity.
- The kind of democracy it pursues leans towards the poor; and it recognises the leading role of the working class in the project of social transformation. Recognising the reality of unequal gender relations, and the fact that the majority of the poor are African women, the ANC pursues gender equality in all practical respects.
- *In this context, the ANC is a disciplined force of the left, organised to conduct consistent struggle in pursuit of a caring society in which the well-being of the poor receives focused and consistent attention”.*



## Contextualisation of the Struggle

- we must continue to defend this strategic outlook of the ANC to ensure that the ANC does not “behave like a shapeless jelly-fish with a political form that is fashioned by the multiple contradictory forces of sea-waves”
- The ANC is overwhelmingly of the working class which occupies the front ranks in the national democratic revolution and its programmes shall always reflect this dominant character without underplaying the other class interests.
- A strong political affinity between the ANC and the labour movement is derived from the fact that the formation of the ANC in 1912 had taken place under conditions in which there was more systematic oppression, more complex and consolidated colonial conditions which were imposed by the formation of the Union of South Africa inaugurated in 1910



- which was constructed on the bases of an alliance between white British and white Afrikaners capital and working class against blacks in general and Africans in particular.
- The historical basis of this is among others derived from the period which heightened the momentum towards the formation of the ANC in 1912.
- This is the formation of the Union of South Africa in 1910 which marked the consolidation of wage labour which had been occasioned by the discovery of diamond fields in 1867 at Kimberly and Gold fields at the Witwatersrand in 1886.



- This process of proletarianisation in the 1800s was insulated by a battery of political legislative framework to enforce the process of wage labour.
- by 1910 the gold and diamond mining Capital had already usurped enough political power and hegemony placing them at a strategic and advantageous position to influence and impose political processes and government policy that could advance their strategic objective of profit maximization.
- the bases upon which a link between Capitalism and the special economic and political colonial structure of the South African society was erected. White capital like needed to maximise their profits but that had to be derived using political legislations that oppressed and economically excluded blacks and African in particular.



## Union's Influence and Authority

- to create economic opportunities, institutionalize exploitation of black labour, avoid any possibility of exploiting white workers and therefore antagonizing the white working class, thus sustaining colonialism of a special type and Apartheid.
- set in motion a process of policies and rules which subjected blacks and Africans in particular to extreme exploitation as cheap labour which ensured profit maximization
- maintained high living standards for ordinary white population.
- represented the consolidation of a relationship between racial oppression and class exploitation directed at benefiting whites at the expense and exclusion of blacks.



- adopted migrant labour system gave rise to the compound system of housing labour, which first started in the diamond, gold and coal mines
- hence Human Settlement got informed by economic superstructure.
- housed their labour in compounds, `hostels`, to make them sound more respectable when secondary and tertiary sectors developed in the twentieth century





- documented that the ruinous effects of the migrant labour system on the social and family life of Africans have been well documented.
- ***African people, were now forced to become wage –earners and lived away from their family so that the employer would not have to pay for the maintenance of the workers wife and children.***
- The co-operative basis of tribal society was broken down, and the entire African people turned into a right-less community of impoverished peasants and underpaid forced labourers in White-controlled farms, mines and factories.
- marked the beginning of a process in which the colonial government was intensifying oppression but at the same time slowly digging its own grave.
- resulted to increased poverty, lost of hope, despair, anger and resentment against the white establishment and all put together created the material bases for the black and particularly African populace to look for a way out, which the formation of the ANC in 1912 pointed out.
- ***The content and form of these legislations had inevitably increased the anger of the workers and made everyone to realise that white rule introduced workers exploitation.***



# Intensification of Workers Struggle

- Since 1910 and launching of the ANC, workers intensified their struggles, fighting at the work place and also in their communities.
- On the 16 December 1919 the Cape Native National Congress, with the Industrial and Commercial Union (ICU) and Industrial Workers of Africa, held a meeting at Ndabeni location resolving to approach both the government and private employers to increase the wages of African and Coloured workers.
- The Cape Native National Congress played a leading role in the strike that ensued as a result of the unwillingness of employers to raise wages.
- The strikers involved were: African dock workers employed by the Railways; African and Coloured workers; casual and general labour employed by the Railways.
- The President of the Congress in the Cape, Rev. Z. R. Mahabane, wrote a strongly worded letter to the press in reply to a statement made by Mr Girdwood, the Port Superintendent of Cape Town, saying *that*;

- *“Mr. Girdwood had the effrontery to suggest that at the outside a couple of pounds a month would cover the gross living expenses of the average raw kaffir... The truth of the matter is that even this "raw kaffir" can never in these days of profiteering subsist and support his family at home and pay his taxes on a sum of 40s per month. Mr Girdwood's horse (if he has any) could not subsist on that amount.*
- Five leaders of the Congress were involved in the ‘bucket strike’ of municipal workers that took place in Johannesburg in 1917, like; D. S. Letanka, L. T. Mvabaza, N. D. Ngojo, R. Cetyiwe and H. Kraai - the last two formed the Cape Town branch of the Industrial Workers of Africa (IWA) - were arrested together with S. P. Bunting and H. C. Hanscombe of the International Socialist League.
- They were charged with instigating the ‘bucket strike’.
- ICU set up offices in the Northern provinces, was welcomed by ANC leaders like J. T. Gumede, R. Ngcayiya, Seloape Thema, and L. T. Mvabaza.
- Workers naturally joined forces fighting side by side under the leadership of the ANC against these laws. In 1948 when the National Party of D.F. Malan assumed power,



# The Offensive on the Workers

- Afrikaner Broederbond in 1918, Sanlam as well as Federale Volksbeleggings, formed as a result of decisions taken at the Ekonomiese Volkskongres in 1939, represented the main landmarks in the rise and development of Afrikaner capital.
- Afrikaners were able to make use of parliament to pass legislation that would favour capital accumulation and the white rule thus exploitation of blacks was deepened
- with the coming into power of the Pact government under Hertzog which introduced the Industrial Conciliation Act of 1924 which excluded black workers.
- through the Industrial Act and other related legislation the Hertzog Pact government adopted the white labour policy whereby the white working class became a front to defend white's privileges at the expense of blacks and African in particular.
- introduced influx control regulations meant create labour pools to control the flow of labour to every sector of the economy and set up the labour bureau which issued Africans with a Dom Boek (ID book) which showed the name of his or her employer.
- This tied down a worker to an employer, however bad his conditions of employment



## The Inadvertent Consequences of the Hertzog Legislations

- these laws brought workers closer to the ANC in the townships and in the rural Bantustans to fight the apartheid.
- it was during these battles that the ANC put emphasis on instilling a need for its members to join trade unions.
- this blossomed over a long period of time into the mushroom growth of the trade-union movement of the 1980s, which has culminated in the formation of the biggest trade-union federation - COSATU – that the country has ever known.
- From the 1950s the ANC was actively involved in the working-class struggle in two significant respects that were to influence the course of the struggle for liberation



## Firstly,

- in 1953 the government amended the Industrial Conciliation Act and brought in apartheid to ensure that trade unions would be organised on a racial basis.
- War Measure 145 of January 1942, which had been renewed from year to year, was incorporated in the Native Labour (Settlement of Disputes) Act of 1953.
- The differences which arose in the trade-union movement as a result of the compulsory enforcement of apartheid by the government led to the formation of two trade-union federations.
- TUCSA, fell in line with government policy not to admit Africans in its membership.
- South African Congress of Trade Unions (SACTU) - COSATU's predecessor - was openly opposed to the government's racial policies.
- The ANC actively assisted in its formation and worked with it in the Congress Alliance.



## Secondly,

- the ANC spared no effort to show to its members and to the public generally the symbiotic relationship between the oppressed and exploited working class and itself in the struggle for liberation.
- It is this role of the ANC in leading and integrating the workers struggle into the National Liberation struggle and of consciously placing the working class at the forefront of the struggle which on among others earned it the vanguard position in the National Democratic Revolution.
- We have been with the ANC through thick and thin, shaping the workers struggles and the liberation struggle into a single continuum.

